

# Secondary Pentobarbital Poisoning in Wildlife

## INTRODUCTION

Euthanasia by sodium pentobarbital injection is a humane way to end the life of a suffering animal, and is recommended for many species by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Panel on Euthanasia. Ironically, this compassionate act can sometimes have the unintended consequence of causing the premature death of other animals. Each year a number of bald and golden eagles, other wildlife, and domestic dogs are intoxicated or killed after ingestion of pentobarbital residues in the tissue of euthanized carcasses. Exposure to these carcasses is almost always the result of improper disposal.



## CAUSE

When an animal is euthanized with pentobarbital injection, the drug is quickly distributed throughout its body. Well-vascularized organs such as the liver will have especially high concentrations of pentobarbital, but other tissues will also contain residues. When a scavenger feeds on the carcass, the degree of intoxication will depend on the amount and type of tissue ingested.

Many animals that ingest poisoned tissue are acutely intoxicated, become comatose, and are discovered lying dead beside the poisoned carcass. Others are able to walk or fly short distances and are found staggering around the field or landfill, in adjacent fields or woodlots, near roost trees, or in parking lots or other areas. Finally, a number of intoxicated victims may be killed by blunt trauma (wandering into traffic or falling from perches), predation, drowning, fatal mobbing attacks by other species, or electrocution after contact with power lines and poles.



## PENALTIES

**Veterinarians and Livestock Owners could be Liable** - Improperly disposing of tainted carcasses may lead to violation of state and federal laws when it results in the death of protected wildlife. Criminal penalties under the Eagle Protection Act (EPA), Endangered Species Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act can range from \$500-\$200,000 and imprisonment.

## PREVENTION

### PROPER DISPOSAL

- € **Incineration/Cremation**, if available, is the preferred method of disposal.
- € **Immediate deep burial** will also prevent access to scavengers. Most regulations require at least 3-4 feet of cover. Beyond local statutory minimums, additional amounts or types of exclusionary cover may be required in certain habitat areas.
- € **Double bagging** with "heavy duty" sacks and clear labeling of poisoned carcasses should be the minimum acceptable standard at every small animal veterinary clinic, humane shelter, or animal control facility that sends out carcasses for third party disposal.
- € Local landfill regulations and management practices must be reviewed and revised if they currently afford easy access by scavengers to poisoned animal carcasses.

**Rendering is not an acceptable way to dispose of a pentobarbital-tainted carcass.** The drug residues are not destroyed in the rendering process, so the tissues and by-products may contain poison and must not be used for animal feed.

For more information on law enforcement and liability issues, or if you have found a dead animal, contact your regional Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Office and visit the FWS Web site at: [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov)

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## Animal Health and Food Safety Services

For additional information contact the Animal Health Branch at:  
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